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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process of structuring a Writing across the Curriculum Workshop for college faculty and reflects on some of the workshop's problems and highlights. Workshop participant selection was based on previous expressions of interest from faculty or from recommendations of department chairs. The workshop itself consisted of six half-day sessions immediately following the end of spring semester. Writing in these workshops was examined and discussed in terms of a thinking-learning process and as a tool for critical thinking or sessions developmental learning meant for achieving larger pedagogical goals, rather than merely as a testing device. Workshop participants began to realize the importance of student writing for academic development and ultimately developed their own collection of progressive assignments which asked students to address different audiences and voices for writing within their discipline. Peer editing was also introduced and eventually accepted by the participants. It is noted that although the workshop focussed on writing across the curriculum, the course's agenda actually helped to explore teaching across the disciplines, using writing as a means to approach learning as a process of discovery and empowerment. Contains an 11-item bibliography. (GLR)

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Beyond Theory and into the Fray: Directing a Faculty Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop

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At the 1990 NERA conference, I reported the results of a comparative study conducted with a SUNY colleague concerning faculty attitudes toward writing across the curriculum. This study surveyed faculty responses from a small liberal arts institution without an instituted WAC program and was then repeated, with appropriate modifications, at SUNY-Fredonia, an institution with a ten-year history of training faculty in the principles and practice of writing across the curriculum. Because of this decade-long effort, the attitudes of Fredonia faculty suggested a strong awareness of the wide-ranging goals of WAC and an appreciation of its contributions to students' intellectual development.

In May of 1991, I was able to transform my research interest in writing across the curriculum into practical experience when I was named director of Fredonia's annual faculty writing across the curriculum workshop. This presentation is intended to provide some insight into structuring such a program and to reflect on some of the workshop's problems and highlights.

Three months before the workshop took place, I consulted with the Dean of the College's general education program to select faculty to invite to participate. We made our selections

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based on previous expressions of interest from faculty or from recommendations of department chairs, and of course we aimed for diversity across disciplines. After receiving acceptances, I met with the six participants to discuss the workshop organization, distribute a survey to learn their individual concerns and interests about the workshop, and to "assign" them a writing exercise before the first session. This exercise, a "writer's autobiography," was designed to help them reflect, through their own writing experiences, on the problems their students may face when confronted with compulsory school writing.

The workshop itself consisted of six, half-day sessions immediately following the end of spring semester. During the sessions, I provided participants with scholarly readings concerning writing as a thinking-learning process. Primarily, though, I acted as facilitator for discussions about writing as a tool for achieving larger pedagogical goals. Additionally, participants shared their autobiographies as well as samples of student writing for a discussion of assignment design and evaluation techniques.

I was fortunate to have six very dedicated and enthusiastic participants from theatre, music, chemistry, sociology, communication, and education. All were already "converts" to WAC in the sense that they believed writing was an important element to students' education and were willing to entertain the idea of including writing into their courses. In a few cases, participants had occasionally used formal writing assignments, but were also pleased to note that I considered exercises such as

lab reports to qualify as types of "real" writing.

At the same time, I was confronted with my own scholarly insularity. After twelve years of teaching and researching process writing, I was privately surprised to discover that all of my colleagues approached writing from a product orientation, even as they eagerly and perceptively discussed teaching and learning in terms of process strategies. Those participants who had incorporated some writing into their courses regarded the assignments more as testing devices than as tools to encourage critical thinking or developmental learning. The concept of using writing to achieve larger cognitive learning goals was new to them.

After examining several examples of "traditional" writing assignments, such as the term paper, then reviewing student responses to these assignments, the participants agreed that the applications provided little useful or meaningful "real world" writing experiences for their students. They also agreed that we, as academics, expect our students to know the language and writing styles of our disciplines without giving them opportunities to read samples of scholarly writing (our own or that of other scholars in our fields). More important, most recognized that since most of our students will not go on to become academics, they might benefit more from writing experiences that addressed other modes of writing within the discipline (such as writing a feature article on a scientific development for a popular magazine, or maintaining a journal of conducting choices for creating musical interpretations).

This revised way of thinking about writing was exciting to them because it allowed for greater pedagogical experimentation and variety. By the end of the workshop, each participant had developed a collection of progressive assignments which asked students to address different audiences and voices for writing within their disciplines. In addition, each created methods for incorporating some form of peer editing into their courses. (Peer editing was a real sore point that we struggled with during the entire six days. As they talked about pedagogical philosophy, the participants stressed that they wanted to help students become independent learners, but they worried about the type of learning that would take place if students were in control).

With varying degrees of reluctance and enthusiasm, we reached a consensus that peer editing was at least worth trying. Their methods of incorporating peer critiques into their courses often took ingenious forms. The participant from chemistry, for instance, decided to provide her students with sample peer reviews received in response to articles she had submitted for publication. When she realized that she, too, was subject to peer review--and that she often learned from reviewer's comments--she easily acknowledged the value to students and perceptively noted that by assessing another's writing, students might look more critically at their own work. In consequence, she designed assignments which required her students to construct a peer review and evaluation of others' articles.

Although the workshop focussed on writing across the

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curriculum, for me, the subversive agenda was to explore teaching across the disciplines, using writing only as a means to approach learning as a process of discovery and empowerment. Too often, I believe we become overly preoccupied with curriculum per se (partly to meet the requirements of individual courses, partly to satisfy administrative expectations). By narrowing our teaching strategies to show results through products only, we may often lose sight of our own pedagogical goals as well as the type of learning our students experience in our classrooms.

Perhaps the most poignant session of the workshop evolved from my question to participants: "Ultimately, what do you want your students to 'come away with' from your courses?" The intensity of reflection on and reaction to this question suggested that we don't ask it of ourselves enough. Although responses varied, the pattern was similar. All participants wanted their students to leave their classrooms as more critical, reflective thinkers, better able to evaluate with sensitivity and multiplicity of perspectives their own ideas and those of others. Most moving, however, was the response from the participant from theatre, whose answer to this question seemed best to reflect the consensus of the group: "I want my students to become good people."

The experience of directing this workshop was both exhausting and exhilarating. The level of interaction with colleagues certainly demanded a greater degree of energy and constant evaluation than any other forum I have participated in as an academic. The effort seemed well spent on all our parts,

however, as we discovered insights into teaching and learning processes through the instrument of writing across the curriculum.

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